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Improving the Skills For True Wellbeing of Adult Educators and Learners

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Abstract

Working with professionals of the adult education sector and with adult learners inspired a European Lifelong Learning project named “WELNESS” – SKILLS FOR TRUE WELLBEING. On many occasions educators and the learners feel stressed by the challenges in their lives. As a result, they experience decreased work engagement and job satisfaction. This project aims at equipping adult education professionals and learners with skills that will allow them to monitor their level of wellbeing and, to apply self-regulation strategies. The present study focuses on detailing the aims, rationales and procedures to be followed throughout the project.

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1. Background

Professionals of adult education need practical tools for self-management and maintaining their wellbeing. The same is true for adult learners – in order to be motivated to learn, expand their horizons and actively contribute to their communities, they need to be able to enhance and sustain their own wellbeing in the first place. Wellbeing has been identified as a foundation for effective teaching and learning. Discussing our experience gained through providing in-service seminars for adult education professionals we have found out that participants of the seminars have reported, on many occasions, that they often feel extremely stressed and overwhelmed by the challenges of their professional and personal lives. As a result, they experience decreased work engagement and job satisfaction and their performance and the quality of their interactions with learners and co-workers is negatively affected. Some of the principals of adult education organizations have reported that their institutions suffer from prolonged absenteeism of staff due to burn-out syndrome. The professionals of the highly rewarding but also challenging field

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of adult education are especially vulnerable to burn out syndrome. They spend plenty of time interacting with others—their students and co-workers, they need to update their knowledge and skills continually and sometimes they need to attend to the challenging task of evaluating their adult learners or subordinates as well as being evaluated. Without practical tools for monitoring their inner state and tools for self-management they are likely to suffer from decreased motivation and work engagement, drop in their creativity and work performance as well as poor health and hence frequent absenteeism.

In the specific case of the work context, a great deal of investigations have been developed during the last years in order to explain the influence of social support from different sources on well-being, health, work satisfaction and organizational results (Beehr, Farmer, Glazer, Guda-nowski, & Nair, 2003; Deelstra et al., 2003). Evidence has also been found on the positive role of social support in the interaction between work and burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In the particular case of teachers, our main focus in the present project, the social support system may play a key role in mitigating the negative effects of burnout. This effect has been found in professionals of the service sector and those whose work is directly related with people (Friedman, 1996; Kahn et al., 2006). Social support increases these professionals' self-esteem and promotes their ability to cope with problems in their work place. In line with this, Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen (1987) found that teachers with high levels of support from their superiors were less vulnerable to experiencing burnout.

Many professionals face working conditions characterized by a high level of emotional involvement and strong interpersonal demands. These conditions may lead to the burnout syndrome if professionals are unable to develop effective coping strategies and manage stress adequately (Carmona, Buunk, Peiró, Rodríguez, & Bravo, 2006; Durán, Extremera, & Rey, 2006). Burnout is not a trivial matter and it can significantly alter people's behavior, impair their quality of life and damage their health, contributing to significant manifestations of disease (Pozo-Muñoz et al., 2008).

Burnout is usually the result of chronic stress at work, combined with other negative working conditions, such as limited promotion opportunities and lack of positive feedback (Cooper, Dewe, & O' Driscoll, 2001; Elfering et al., 2005).

Existing burnout models have emphasized the role of mediating processes that may contribute to reduce the negative consequences of burnout in teachers. Some of these mediating factors are social support, psychosocial resources and coping re-sources (Pozo-Muñoz et al., 2008).

Myers and Diener (1995) proposed that subjective wellbeing reflects "a preponderance of positive thoughts and feelings about one's life" and defined subjective wellbeing as "the relative presence of positive affect, absence of negative affect, and satisfaction with life". Subjective wellbeing is interested in why individuals evaluate their lives in positive ways. Subjective well-being is a field that comprises positive characteristics and measurements. Also, it concentrates on lengthwise affects more than temporary emotional states. Subjective wellbeing has two general components: Emotional and cognitive. The emotional component consists of positive and negative affects whereas the cognitive component is related with the individual's life satisfaction (Diener, & Suh, 1997; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002).

Pozo-Muñoz et al. published in 2008 a study that tried to determine whether social support has a direct impact on wellbeing or a buffer effect, reducing the negative consequences of burnout on teaching professionals' health and well-being. Overall social support showed a significant main effect on teachers' wellbeing. Concerning the buffer effect model, significant interaction effects were verified between social support and burnout. Taking an applied perspective, the results obtained in the present study point out the relevance of interventions focused on social support and burnout coping strategies for teaching professionals.

Cenkseven-Önder, F. and Sari, M., (2009) wanted to determine the rate of how teachers' subjective wellbeing is predicted by their perceptions about the quality of school life and burnout levels. The participants of the study consisted of 161 teachers (93 females, 68 males) who were working in elementary schools. Results showed that teachers' subjective wellbeing levels were predicted significantly by the Quality of School Life Scale sub-factors, namely "status" and "curriculum" and burnout scale sub-factor, namely "coping work-related stress." Teachers' life satisfaction levels were predicted significantly by the variables of "status", "coping work-related stress" and "school administrator" which is a sub factor of the Quality of School Life Scale. Also, teachers' positive affect was predicted by the variables of "status", "positive affects towards school" and "teachers," and teachers' negative affect was predicted by the variables of "coping work-related stress", "status," and "curriculum." Results also indicated that the

contribution of predictors could be accounted as 39% for subjective well-being; 23% for life satisfaction; 23% for positive affect, and 37% for negative affect.

Another study (Finalayson, 2006) conducted by Dr Erica Wimbush, Dr Miriam O'Connor and Dr Donna McKinnon and Dr. Sally Brown, investigated 'stress' among teachers and the provision of occupational health and other forms of support through local authorities. Methodology included: a systematic review – examining the question: 'which workplace interventions are effective in improving teachers' health and well-being?'; mapping of existing local authority support services; a survey of teachers across Scotland and focus groups.

The main findings are:

- Almost half of teachers questioned reported that they found their jobs very or extremely stressful, with nine out of ten teachers believing that the job has become more stressful.
- More than three-quarters of respondents believed that psychological stress at work had a knock-on effect on their physical wellbeing;
- Almost half suffered from a particular health problem; 12 per cent of these were mental health or behavioural problems;
- Main stressors were pupil indiscipline, relationships at work and excessive workload;
- Two thirds of respondents reported personal problems which affected their work.

These researches combined with our experiences in adult education inspired a European Lifelong Learning Program named "WELNESS" – SKILLS FOR TRUE WELLBEING, the project started on 01.01.2013. The countries involved in this European Project are Romania (coordinator), Cyprus, Poland, Italy, Slovenia, and United Kingdom. Well-being is of growing significance in policy circles and in wider public debate. Learning providers and policy-makers need to develop ways of measuring well-being as it is still in its infancy.

2. Aims and objectives of the project

Skills that ensure sustainable wellbeing are fundamental to one's ability to make the best use of his/her potential, cope with life challenges, work fruitfully and contribute to other people's lives in a meaningful way. This project aims at equipping adult education professionals and learners in skills that will allow them to monitor their level of wellbeing and, when needed, to apply self-regulation strategies in order to return to satisfying level of wellness. As a result they will be able to use their potential fully as they will have access to their inner resources such as clear and focused thinking, visionary thinking, imagination, deriving wisdom from their experience, problem solving, intuition, emotional balance, ability to connect with others in respectful and meaningful way, motivation, energy etc.

The specific aims and objectives of the project are as follow:

1. To examine the needs of adult education professionals (teachers, trainers, managers, administrative staff), in particular assess their baseline level of wellbeing and problems that they have that affect the level of their wellbeing
2. To examine the needs of adult learners (above 18 years old, those who do not participate any longer in vocational or tertiary education; the ratio of men to woman should be close to 50%-50% and age groups should be equally represented), in particular assess their baseline level of wellbeing and problems that they have that affect the level of their wellbeing
3. To empower the adult education staff and learners to take responsibility for their wellbeing, in particular, to raise their understanding of attitudes and behaviors that sabotage wellbeing as well as those that contribute to wellbeing
4. To provide the adult education staff and learners will tools that will help them to: manage their stress level effectively; expand their creativity; enhance their communication skills; increase their self-awareness (of their values, needs, body, emotions, thoughts and patterns of behavior), regulate their emotions effectively; motivate themselves more effectively.
5. To produce high quality resources (in-service seminar, guide book, internet platform) for adult education professionals.
6. Produce attractive curricula, workshops and online resources for adult learners

7. To increase job satisfaction and work engagement of adult education professionals and prevent burn-out syndrome
8. To contribute to developing measurable indicators of wellbeing
9. To encourage interdisciplinary dialog and collaboration in the field of promoting wellbeing through adult education

3. Intervention Strategy

In order to achieve the objectives of the project and produce the foreseen deliverables the project will be divided into several phases. Methodology will include:

- Thorough cross national needs analysis we are going to assess the level of wellbeing in adult education professionals and learners. Research shows that studies relating to subjective sense of wellbeing are underrepresented. By comparing the situation in different countries we will be able to better assess the wellbeing level as well as the level of stress of the parties involved in adult education as well as the factors that contribute to high wellbeing and allow them to maintain their motivation and work/learning engagement. We will examine how work environment can be improved in order to raise creativity and work performance and what practical skills for wellbeing can be promoted. This contributes to joyful and fulfilling lifelong learning and success at work. As the material will be collected in 6 participating countries it will reflect the European diversity on this topic. Exchange between partners and learning from each other will be encouraged.
- Investigation of key skills necessary to promote wellbeing in adult educators and learners
- Design of first version of seminars and workshops represents creating high quality seminars for adult education staff and attractive workshops for adult learners. Conclusions from cross national needs analysis will be the foundation for design of the seminars and workshops.
- Testing of the courses through pilot seminars and workshops – this activity will focus on conducting pilot courses, designed by this project, for both adult education staff and learners in home organizations of all partners.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the courses and training materials
- Design of the final version of courses, training materials and online resources: a guidebook for adult education professionals, leaflets and online resources for adult learners and platform for exchange of experiences for professionals.
- Dissemination of the results on national and European level (implemented from the beginning of the project) - Dissemination will be an on-going process throughout the whole project in terms of bringing feedback as well as disseminating the results.
- Exploitation of the results (this phase will also start early in order to ensure best impact of the project) - will ensure sustainability of the project beyond its life through effective exploitation of results in all countries involved and, most importantly, on European level. Policy makers will be involved in order to ensure best impact.

The project will identify specific needs of adult education staff and learners, develop, test, implement and disseminate new curricula and teaching methods for use in adult education, including development of trainings and materials for use by teachers themselves and adult learners. The results of the project will be disseminated through conferences, press releases, newsletters, websites and other communication channels that will allow us to reach the widest possible audience. In order to sustain the outcomes of the project Grundtvig in-service seminars will be offered. Also conferences on national level will be carried out.

4. Conclusion

We expect the project to help all involved to foster mutual understanding and a sense of possessing a common European citizenship. We hope that the project, through exchange of experiences and good practices, will improve adult education management system within each partner institution and enable development of new European projects which will be a beneficial for the society. Learners and staff will have a chance to broaden their horizons,

learn to look at their life from different perspective and increase their awareness of European shared values. Last but not least, partners will get to know history, culture and traditions of other European countries as well as adult education practices and policies. Participation in this program will give European added value to the work of our organizations and help to build new communication channels and avenues for on-going collaboration.

The project, focused on promotion of wellbeing and mental health, addresses important European priorities and directly corresponds to recommendations of European Commission. Mental Health Declaration for Europe resulting from WHO European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health “Facing the Challenges, Building Solutions” that took place in Helsinki on 12–15 January 2005 acknowledges that “mental health and mental well-being are fundamental to the quality of life and productivity of individuals, families, communities and nations, enabling people to experience life as meaningful and to be creative and active citizens.” The declaration also states that “the primary aim of mental health activity is to enhance people’s well-being and functioning by focusing on their strengths and resources, reinforcing resilience and enhancing protective external factors.” Promotion of mental health and wellbeing is recognized as priority for WHO and its Member States, the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe. European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being launched at a Conference on Mental Health and Well-being on 13 June 2008 states that mental health is a human right that enables citizens to enjoy well-being, quality of life and health. Moreover it is a factor that promotes learning, working and participation in society. “The level of mental health and well-being in the population is a key resource for the success of the EU as a knowledge-based society and economy. It is an important factor for the realization of the objectives of the Lisbon strategy, on growth and jobs, social cohesion and sustainable development. The mental health and well-being of citizens and groups, including all age groups, different genders, ethnic origins and socio-economic groups, needs to be promoted base on targeted interventions that take into account and are sensitive to the diversity of the European population”.

The project will allow us to conduct needs analysis in each participating country. Comparison of the results will help us design in service seminars for adult education staff that will take into consideration mutual needs of participants from different countries as well as enhance awareness and sensitivity to intercultural differences. It will be invaluable asset for high quality European seminars. Stress is a common problem in all EU states that is why different states need to get together to share their perspectives and find a creative solution to this problem in order to promote wellbeing through adult education. The concept of wellbeing will be understood on deeper level thanks to cross-cultural needs analysis as well as exchange of points of view, experiences and good practices between the partners. We believe that collaboration of 7 partners from 6 different countries will have great impact on each organization as it will lead to implementing new practices, new courses, new ways of attracting adult learners, new ways of solving problems etc. It is also expected that the project will help to identify mutual, despite of cultural differences, factors of wellbeing and will contribute to having better awareness of shared European values and identity.

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